Radiotherapy for Cancer of the Vulva

Information for patients

Northern Centre for Cancer Care
Freeman Hospital
**Introduction**

Your oncologist has advised a course of radiotherapy to your groin(s) and/or vulva as part of your cancer treatment.

This leaflet has been written to give you general information and answer some of the questions you may have about the side effects of radiotherapy.

We hope you will find this helpful but if you have any further questions relating to your treatment, please do not hesitate to ask your radiographer, your nurse specialist or your oncologist at the Northern Centre for Cancer Care (NCCC).

**Possible short term (early) side effects**

Early side effects are temporary and affect most patients. The side effects generally develop during the second half of the course of treatment. Sometimes side effects can last for several weeks, however usually settle within three to four months.

**Effects on the skin**

During treatment patients may experience changes in the skin over the area that has been treated. The skin may

♦ feel tight and uncomfortable

♦ become pink or red

♦ become dry and flaky

♦ be sore and/or itch

Your skin will be monitored by your radiographers during radiotherapy and you will be given advice on skincare. You will also be seen once a week in a radiotherapy clinic by your oncologist, the nurse specialist or specialist radiographer who will examine your skin and advise on any creams if necessary.
**Skin care – what can I do to help?**

We recommend that you take special care of your skin during and up to six weeks after your radiotherapy as the skin reaction may continue after treatment has finished.

♦ Keep the area cool. Wear loose, preferably cotton clothing that does not rub the skin and will allow air to circulate.

♦ Do not expose the treated area to the sun. Do not use a sunbed as this could make the reaction worse.

♦ Do not soak the area in the bath or under a long hot shower. You may wash your skin in the treated area using a simple, non-perfumed soap applied gently with your hands and rinsed well with warm water. Avoid using flannels or sponges. Pat the area dry with a soft towel or let the skin dry naturally.

♦ Do not use talcum powder, bubble baths, bath salts, shower gels or body lotions on the treated area as they tend to be highly perfumed and can dry or irritate the skin. You may be given a moisturising cream to soothe the skin, from the radiographers or specialist nurse, or your oncologist may prescribe a cream if needed.

**Inflammation of the bladder lining**

Radiotherapy to the groin may cause inflammation to the lining of the bladder, which can make you feel that you want to pass water frequently. You may also feel a burning sensation when you pass water. It helps to drink plenty of water and other fluids to make your urine more dilute. Let your radiographer, oncologist or specialist nurse know if you have this problem as they will first need to make sure you do not have a urine infection.

**Diarrhoea**

Radiotherapy to the groin(s) may also irritate the bowel and cause your stools to be loose or may even cause diarrhoea. If you develop this problem tell your radiographer, oncologist or specialist nurse as they can give you some medication to help treat this. It is important to drink plenty of water to replace the fluid lost through diarrhoea.
**Tiredness / Fatigue**

Radiotherapy can sometimes make you feel very tired especially towards the end of your course of treatment and for a number of weeks after. It may be a while before you feel able to do some of your usual activities. You should rest as much as you need to although gentle exercise may help. Fatigue is something nearly everyone with cancer feels. It affects people differently and it is important to tell the health care team if you are feeling more tired than usual. There are some physical causes, such as anaemia that are readily treatable.

Please ask for a booklet on fatigue at the Information Centre in NCCC which will give you tips to help with this.

**Your progress**

You will be seen by a member of your specialist team once a week during your treatment. This will be an opportunity to discuss any concerns or problems you may have.

**Please tell your treatment radiographers if you have any problems between appointments.**

**Possible long-term or permanent effects of treatment**

As the skin of the vulva is very sensitive to radiation it can become discoloured (reddened or darker) and swollen. This can happen months or even years after radiotherapy. The swelling can be reduced by gentle, upwards massage which you can be taught to do by a nurse specialist or physiotherapist. Unfortunately the discolouration of the skin is permanent.

You may also develop a swelling in either or both legs (called lymphodema). Management of this condition requires a referral to a specialist.

Please ask your oncologist or nurse for more information.
Your emotions

It is important to make time for yourself. Emotions associated with the reactions to a diagnosis of cancer may come to the surface at various stages during your treatment. Don’t worry if you feel low, this is normal. If you need to talk to someone, please ask, we are here to help. We have a wide range of support services within the department, such as the Palliative Care Team, dietician and social worker. A Clinical Psychology service is also available at NCCC on referral from your oncologist.

Sex

Having surgery and/or radiotherapy for cancer of the vulva may have an effect on your sex life. However when you are tired or have worries about your cancer, your sex drive can be affected. This is personal to each individual and may be an aspect of your life about which you have concerns. You may have questions you wish to ask. Please talk to your radiographer, oncologist or the nurse specialist if you would like to talk about these issues confidentially. There is more information available on this subject in the Information Centre at NCCC.

After your radiotherapy has finished

The side effects of radiotherapy can continue for several weeks after treatment has finished. Continue with your skincare routine until any changes return to normal. You will be given a discharge letter with a copy for your GP summarising any side effects you may have and any creams or medication you have been prescribed at NCCC.

You will be sent a follow up appointment to see your specialist team usually between 6 to 12 weeks after finishing treatment. You will get a letter giving you a date and time for your appointment. If you are worried about your side effects after your treatment has finished, please contact your nurse specialist for further advice.
Useful contact telephone numbers:

Gynae-Oncology Nurse Specialist
Northern Centre for Cancer Care
0191 213 8338

Northern Centre for Cancer Care Macmillan Information and Support Centre
0191 2138611
Opening hours
Monday to Friday from 9am to 4.30pm

Newcastle upon Tyne Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust
www.newcastle-hospitals.org.uk

CancerBACUP
freephone 0808 800 1234
www.cancerbacup.org.uk

Macmillan Cancer Relief
Head office 020 7840 7840
freephone 0808 800 1234
www.macmillan.org.uk

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